

Meet With Triumph and Disaster

by MysteryTrek

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Summary: In the wake of the many events that have wracked the island of Berk, things finally seem to be settling back down into some semblance of normalcy. Emphasis on seem: Astrid has been poisoned, and it hits her right when she and Hiccup are out on a survey mission. Now, she, Hiccup, and their dragons must survive and make it back far from home. HTTYD 2 spoilers. Minor edits made.

1. Exile

A/N: My first How To Train Your Dragon story. A fandom I've wanted to write for literally for years now, and I finally have something :) This will be a rather short story, three or four chapters. Five tops. And future chapters will likely get longer. Despite their destination, this is not a crossover with Brave.

Exile

"If seeds in the black earth can turn into such beautiful roses, what might not the heart of man become in its long journey toward the stars?"

-G.K. Chesterton

Astrid Hofferson sat alone in her threadbare office at the Dragon Academy, going over the stack of ledgers that had just been delivered there. For the past several years, and ever since the number of people on Berk who actually rode dragons had increased, she'd been saddled with a large workload. But it had never been this huge before. It had never needed to be. For the past five years Hiccup had been in command of Berk's Dragon Academy, which doubled effectively as their primary defensive and exploration arm. It had started with just her, Hiccup, and those original riders who flew with him against the Green Death. Back then, her duties as Hiccup's second had been relatively simple: work with Hiccup and Fishlegs on increasing their knowledge of dragons, ensure that Hiccup's orders were carried out

during combat situations, and ride herd on Snotlout and the twins to keep their dysfunctions from dooming them all. She almost never had any bureaucratic stuff to handle. Responsibility for maintaining their facilities had always been the Chief's job, the most she'd had to do was tell Stoick and Gobber that the twins had destroyed something and the repair crews would be there within a day at the most.

But then when she'd been about sixteen, her job had expanded along with the Academy. When most of the dragons they'd liberated from the Green Death returned to the island, and villagers started bonding with individual dragons, they'd started reporting to the academy for lessons, and since the official stance of Berk had always been that Berk's dragon population was to be administered by the Dragon Academy, and that the academy was directly responsible for overseeing individual dragons and their riders, Astrid's workload had suddenly tripled. In addition to her previous responsibilities, she also had to make sure the lists of people certified to ride dragons were maintained, maintain the new stables, ensure there was enough fodder for the dragons, draw up training schedules, and so on and so forth. Ultimately it was all Hiccup's responsibility, but the whole point of being someone's second was to organize everything so efficiently that the only thing your commander had to do was make a few of the more important decisions before signing off on everything else you did. In point of fact she took her duties supplementing and supporting Hiccup in the field, as well as the weekly dragon races, as a relief from the seemingly never ending pile of reports that seemed to breed like particularly lusty rabbits on her desk.

Then in the horrifying events of three weeks ago, Stoick had died and leadership for all of Berk suddenly landed on her and Hiccup's head. The four years she'd spent in the management side of being a second-in-command had ensured that she hadn't flown Stormfly out to the tallest seastack she could find and fling herself in the ocean, but the abrupt increase in her workload still galled at her. She was young (she was only twenty for Thor's sake!) and while she wasn't technically what military officers a thousand years later would call being chained to a desk, it was starting to feel too damned close for her comfort.

But no matter how much she'd complain, this was her responsibility and she'd die before she shirked it for anything but the most absolutely compelling reasons; be it helping to administer all of Berk, or just working to keep four neurotic and dysfunctional dragon riders under control, she was Hiccup's second and, very shortly, his wife, and would be until the day she made her own journey to Valhalla. And she wouldn't have it any other way.

She reached for her large brown mug of ale and took a large swig and abruptly stopped as the pungent taste of nutmeg hit her tongue. After a moment, she forced herself to swallow. Then sat back in her chair, making a mental note to have words with the mead hall later; nutmeg was expensive, and their supply was limited. For now though, she had a, she looked at the next scroll on her desk, and shuddered mentally, a naval stores inventory to look over. She thanked the gods mentally, her and Hiccup were due to make a major push south later. While it was by no means the longest deep range mission they'd ever gone on, it would probably be the most important, for they were going to make contact with the two huge islands to their south, Albion and Eire. These islands were reputed to be so huge that according to

trader Johann, there they both held five or six entire kingdoms on either of them. And many of them, it was said, were under the rule of their fellow Norse. Vikings like themselves.

She couldn't wait to find out

* * *

><p>Hiccup stood on the edge of a cliff overlooking the village, in front of what had once been Mildew's house, it's former occupant having declined to return home after he was formally amnestied for helping Hiccup and his father escape from, and end, the occupation of Outcast Island by the late and decidedly unlamented Dagur the Deranged and his Berserker. He'd refused even after Stoick had praised him for his role and the courage it had undeniably taken to maintain contact with Alvin during the long, savage months of Berserker occupation. He'd stayed, simply stating that it didn't feel right for him to return.<p>

Stoick had honored his choice and transferred his old house to the Dragon Academy for use as a supply depot. It had also served as an emergency shelter for when he or his riders were caught out in bad weather.

Hiccup had to shake off the particularly prurient memory of the other use he and Astrid had put it to over the years.

He heard a soft warbling behind him, he smiled and looked to see Toothless standing next to him. His best friend's long, sleek black form contorted as his dragon writhed on his back, soaking in the sunlight. He smirked, enjoying the site as he always did.

"So what's the plan?" A familiar voice that sent his heart soaring every time he heard it, he turned to look at his fiancée, momentarily entranced by the sight. Her long blonde hair glowing in the afternoon sun as she dismounted from Stormfly, warm blue eyes staring at him as she smiled the smile that dazzled him and made him want to melt into a puddle every time she favored him with one.

He shook himself after a moment, and he could have sworn he saw Astrid smirk, she knew what the effect she had on him was.

"Not much to figure out," Hiccup said matter-of-factly, as Toothless and Stormfly greeted each other. "We'll fly south. If the distances are right, inside of about five hours we'll be in what is supposed to be the 'Kingdom of Alba.' We'll find a cave to set up camp, spend a week scouting the area then head home. Simple."

"Seems simple," Astrid said warily. "If we're lucky. We haven't always been able to keep our presence hidden from the locals."

"You don't have to tell me twice," Hiccup said sighing. It was a battle in one of the archipelagos to the south of their own that had cost Hiccup his crossbow shield. They'd barely escaped with their lives, and Hiccup had had to replace his weapon. Not that he wasn't proud of all the time and energy he'd put into Inferno, and his sword had served him well over the years. Along with his armor.

"One more thing before we set out," Hiccup said as he stood up. "I made you something." He gestured towards Mildew's house with his

head. "It's just inside, go take a look."

Astrid, a quizzical look on her face, walked passed him into the house, shutting the door behind her.

After a few minutes the door opened and Astrid walked out, a look of utter shock and elation on her face. She was clad in the same style of dark brown leather armor used by Hiccup herself, the Berk crest in red on the left shoulder as it was on his own.

"Hiccup-", she began, astonishment on her voice.

Hiccup smiled. "It's time I finally admitted it was ready to be mass produced. I've had suits made for the other riders, but I figured I'd deliver yours personally."

Astrid beamed as she closed the difference between them and pressed her lips to his.

They stood there in each other's arms a long moment before Astrid broke the kiss. "Thank you," she said softly as she walked over to Stormfly and climbed on her back, settling herself into her saddle.

She slid her helmet over her head. "Are we going to go?"

Hiccup smiled and moved towards Toothless.

Roughly five hours later, Hiccup was looking down at the vast expanse of land below him, eyes peeled for any trace of land. They should be running into land soon, according to their estimates, but they hadn't yet.

"So how are you enjoying your new flight suit?" Hiccup found himself asking in an attempt to break up the monotony of staring at endless blue ocean.

Astrid beamed at him. "I'm loving it, babe! Thank you."

Hiccup beamed back. "What can I say, I know how to please my lady."

"That you do-", Astrid began before she abruptly folded over her gut, leaning over the side.

"Astrid?" he asked, as worry wormed its way into his gut. He watched as Astrid pulled her helmet off. Her skin had gone green and she had that dazed look in her eye that one got when one was about to vomit.

And since she was hanging over the left side, there was a good chance the vomit was going to hit him in the face. The split-second he took to look at Toothless indicated that he saw the problem too. Hiccup tugged motioned with his feet and Toothless took them up and over Astrid and Stormfly in a graceful roll to level out on her right side. Just in time too, as the moment Toothless leveled out, Astrid threw up seemingly everything she'd ever eaten.

"Are you okay, Astrid?" He asked.

She looked over at her, her face green, eyes glassy and squinting.
"No, Hiccup I-,"

Her eyes squeezed shut as her entire body started shaking.

"_Astrid!_" He shouted, "Just hold on, we're going to head back to Berk just-"

Everything seemed to slow in that instant, that moment when Astrid fell, shaking from Stormfly's back.

2. Wounded Soldiers

Chapter Two

Wounded Soldiers

"Life is ever lord of Death

And Love can never lose its own."

-John Greenleaf Whittier _Snow Bound_

Everything slowed in that moment, in that instant when Astrid fell shaking from Stormfly's back, tumbling towards the vast blue expanse of the ocean below him. A shadow moved out of the corner of his eye and he watched as Stormfly dove after her. Unlike Hookfang, no one needed to remind Stormfly her rider had fallen from her back, and the iridescent blue and red Nadder fell towards her, wings crushed against her flanks as she allowed her greater weight to slice through the air resistance between her and Astrid.

Abruptly his ears became aware of a roaring sound and he stopped as he realized he was yelling. Yelling, and pushing Toothless down with his hands. Every instinct in his body wanted to follow Stormfly in her dive, but the annoyed look Toothless gave him brought him up short. If he dove now, he belatedly realized, they ran the risk of running into Stormfly and sending all four of them in the drink.

"Come on, girl," he said, urging both of them on. "You can do it, Stormfly. Get her."

And she was doing it, the blue-red ball of dragon was falling rapidly, faster than Astrid was falling towards the ocean and the impact with the surface of the water that, at her speeds, would kill her instantly. At precisely the right instant, Stormfly's wings shot out, slowing her descent as her clawed feet reached out to pluck Astrid out of the air.

And in precisely that instant, a convulsion extended one of Astrid's leather flight surfaces, and the wind caught it and sent her hurtling forward and away from her dragon's grasp.

"All right, bud it's our turn," Hiccup growled as he and Toothless turned and dove, slewing in on a reciprocal course towards Astrid. Toothless's wings aligned in a diagonal against his flanks as dragon and rider hurtled towards her. His mind flashed back to that horrible

day five years ago when one of Snotlout's attempts to hog the glory for himself had sent Astrid falling towards the forest floor back on Berk. She'd already slammed into several branches and had been knocked unconscious by the time he and Toothless had managed to intercept. It had been a miracle that she hadn't broken her back or been killed by the impact.

She hadn't of course. She'd regained consciousness, and with enough energy to try to beat Snotlout into a pulp and shove his helmet up his ass to boot. He shook his head and watched as Astrid continued to convulse wildly, the wind continuing to twist her life a leaf in the air.

"All right," Hiccup said as Toothless struggled to match Astrid's rapid course shifts. "We're going to have to time this one if we want to get it right." He watched, watched as Toothless matched Astrid's course shifts, watched the ocean that continued to grow steadily bigger. Watched as he and his dragon hurled themselves toward her.

Then something shifted. What it was he could never say for certain, but something in the way she turned screamed in his mind. Telling him that it was now, now or watch the woman he loved die.

"_Now!_"

Toothless' wings extended out, as his hind feet grabbed and clutched Astrid's legs securely. Toothless slowed, leveling his descent to bleed off momentum before winging his way back towards Stormfly.

"Astrid!" He shouted down at the weakly moving form clutched gently but firmly in Toothless's claws. "Talk to me, honey! Tell me you're all right."

Astrid managed to pull herself up, holding onto Toothless' leg and give him a weak thumb's up.

"Hold on!" Hiccup said, desperately. "We'll find someplace to put down. We may have to head back towards Berk and-", then he noticed it, on the horizon, a dark blue outline against the light blue of the ocean and the sky. Land.

He needed to check Astrid out as soon as possible. "Take us over there, bud" he said softly. Toothless warbled in response as he flew off into the distance, winging his way to that far distant coast, with Stormfly close beside him

* * *

><p>The next hour was a blur of pain and noise for Astrid. Every nerve ending in her body felt like it was being set on fire. Her body continued to writhe and contort with convulsions even as Toothless continued to carry her in his claws. And it was cold. So very cold. All she could do was hang there, shivering and in pain, with nothing in front of her but blue sky. Then abruptly she felt herself descending. No! The panicked thought echoed in her pain-numbed brain like a thunderclap and she writhed, sitting up as much as she was able before she saw Toothless's black form, still

clutching him in his claws. She looked to her side and breathed a sigh of relief. They were descending at last, but she wasn't falling, they were headed towards what looked to be a tall sea stack spotted in green moss jutting out of an also moss-covered sandstone platform sitting out there in the water.

She watched as the platform loomed larger and larger in her vision before Toothless let her drop lightly to it. She lay there, arms and legs stiff with cold as Toothless set down.

"Astrid!" Hiccup's comforting voice said as she heard rather than saw him close the distance between them in a few steps. She felt herself being picked gingerly off the ground and being turned around. He propped her up and brought his waterskin to her lips.

She drank it desperately, managing to bring her right hand up to keep it to her lips and tilt it back, at the realization just how desperately thirsty she was. She only stopped when the water started flowing into her mouth in dribs and drabs. Hiccup pulled it away, replaced with his desperate terrified face as he cradled her in his arms.

"Are you okay?" Hiccup blurted, his desperation and fear trebling his voice. She smiled weakly. She would have hugged him if it didn't hurt so very much. Instead she simply let the man she loved hold her in his arms. "Can you walk? I can't look at you very well out here on this stack."

She nodded, even though her body still trembled. "I can walk. But my left shoulder; I think I dislocated it during the fall."

"Okay," Hiccup said. "Let's get it back in and then we can go inland, find a cave or something to get you out of the elements."

"Why not just head home?"

Hiccup motioned with his head and pulled her up. She sighed in dismay at the wall of dark grey cloud to the north. A massive storm to the north, in between them and Berk.

"Let's get this shoulder back in and find shelter," Astrid said softly. Hiccup nodded and began to undo the clasps to Astrid's flight suit so he could get at her shoulder. He mounted his foot in her armpit for leverage than pulled. The shoulder clicked back into place, painfully. Hiccup helped her back into suit, then walked her still shaking form over to Toothless. She held onto him as much as she could as they and their dragons launched themselves into the air towards the coast.

Despite the pain she'd passed out by the time they passed over land.

* * *

><p>The first thing Astrid's mind became aware of as she drifted slowly back towards consciousness was warmth. She was warm. Very warm. Then the pain, a dull ache through every part of her body reappeared. Her eyes fluttered open and she found herself staring at a cave wall covered in green moss, glowing orange in the light of the crackling fire she now registered as behind her. She was bundled up

in her bedroll and covered in furs, she realized. Her flight leathers were gone and she was in her shift and smallclothes.

She looked over to see Hiccup's lanky form hunched over the fire.

"Hiccup?" She said.

Her redheaded, green-eyed intended turned around, a relieved smile on his face. "Astrid!" He said. He grabbed a bowl and spoon out of the cooking gear she now realized he had strewn about the cave floor and ladled up something into it before walking over to her.

"Here," he said, proffering up the bowl, and the rich meaty smell coming out of it caused her mouth to water, despite the pain that was now starting to spread through her body again. She reached out for it with trembling hands, took a spoonful, being sure to grab some meat, and put it in her mouth. Boar meat. One of the dragons must have gotten it, as one or even two humans hunting wild boar on their own was tantamount to suicide.

A shadow fell across her bowl as she ate and she looked up to see Stormfly and Toothless staring at her. After a moment they started nudging at the back of her head softly, warbling in greeting.

"Hey, guys," she said, putting her bowl down and hugging, more like draping herself, over Stormfly while reaching out to scratch under Toothless' chin. "You must have been worried sick about me, huh?"

"We all have," Hiccup said softly. "Astrid, what went wrong? What happened out there?"

Astrid sighed. "I don't know, Hiccup. One minute I was fine, the next I started puking my guts out over Stormfly's side." She shot her dragon an apologetic look. "Sorry about that, girl."

Stormfly warbled her acceptance and plopped down next to her.

"Were you feeling sick before we left?" Hiccup asked.

Astrid shook her head. "No. I was feeling fine, great actually. The only thing I was sick of today was paperwork."

Hiccup, undaunted, kept pressing, "Did you eat or drink anything out of the ordinary?"

"Well," Astrid said slowly, her mind casting back over her day. "There was this one thing. When I was drinking my ale this morning I noticed it had nutmeg in it."

Hiccup looked up at her, eyes wide. "Nutmeg? I thought we only served nutmeg ale for Snoggletog."

Astrid nodded. "It wasn't nutmeg ale really, more like they took the ale I normally drink and just dumped nutmeg in it. I figured they were trying to treat me for expediting the repairs to the mead hall, but overdid it." _Though why would they do that now? _She felt sick to her stomach again, and not just from the nutmeg.

Hiccup shook his head, a stony look on his face. "Maybe, but I don't think so. Something I overheard Trade Johann telling the mead hall proprietors a few years ago. It was a warning not to use too much nutmeg in cooking, that it caused well, nausea, convulsions, and generalized body pain. He then launched into one of his anecdotes about it. I tuned that part out like I always do of course, but the warning stuck. It's a warning he's repeated every time since." He sighed. "Astrid, I think you were poisoned. Deliberately."

Astrid nodded. "So do I. But why _nutmeg_? Why not a poison that would kill me outright? It seems so needlessly complicated."

"Actually it makes sense," Hiccup said, standing up and beginning to pace. "Heather, for instance, would probably be able to tell if you'd suddenly dropped dead of hemlock or something else guaranteed to be fatal. But nutmeg? Most people don't know it can be poisonous in large quantities. And if our suspect knew you'd be flying, he or she would try to dose you in time enough to make sure it took effect while you were in the saddle. If you'd fallen into the ocean, you'd have died instantly and we wouldn't have been able to recover your body and that'd have been the end of it." Astrid saw Hiccup's lower lip trembling, and she knew that the events of that afternoon were playing over and over in his mind.

Astrid, despite the pain that was wracking her body stood up, meaning to walk over to her lover.

Hiccup was by her side in an instant. "No, milady, lie back down. You're in no shape to be walking," he said even as he pushed her gently, but firmly, back into the bedroll and covered her up. "You'll likely be sick for days and I don't want you stressing your system out any more than you have to. Besides, we're going to have to try to get back tomorrow. And you need to be as rested as possible." He slid under the furs and the covers and lay next to her, holding her to him. She wrapped her arms around him and held him tight.

"We'll get through this together, every step of the way," he whispered in her ear, even as a thunderclap from the approaching storm front burst over their little cave. Louder, he said, "Unlike Toothless that time he swallowed a Bloodbane Eel."

She could tell from Toothless' grunting that he was giving his rider an annoyed look.

"Yeah, that's right, I went there," Hiccup said, his tone suggesting that he only being playful. Mostly.

It started raining a few minutes later.

It was still raining when they woke up the next morning, and what was worse, the wind had picked up.

Hiccup sighed, leaning back against the cave wall. "Well, we can't fly out in _that_," Hiccup muttered sullenly. Astrid made to walk over to him, when the sudden sensation of her gorge rising made her dive for the large space that ran down the middle of the cave and throw up everything she had managed to eat last night.

Undaunted, and knowing that no matter how much one threw up it was

vital to keep something in your stomach to throw up, she grabbed some of the dried yak jerky they always took and began chewing on it in a desultory fashion.

Neither one of them said a word. No one needed too. They both knew they were grounded until the storm passed and that someone needed to get back to Berk. They also both knew that she was too sick to fly, which meant that only Hiccup and Toothless could get back to Berk and stymie whatever threat was bearing down on them. Which, if one had their priorities straight in their mind, Hiccup had to leave as soon as the storm died down. Even if that meant leaving her and Stormfly alone for however long it took to ensure the security of Berk and/or until she finally felt strong enough to fly home herself.

But ashamed as she was to admit it, she was terrified. She didn't know what the long-term effects of this were going to be. There was this terrible, gnawing fear in her gut at the prospect of Hiccup leaving her to face this alone in a cave. But Hiccup was the Chief of Berk, it was his duty to put Berk's long-term survival and her sovereignty above the well-being of any one of person. Even if that person was essentially his wife, even if they still needed the ceremony to make it official.

But something she knew about Hiccup was that he was a human, a man, as well as a chief. The chief's duty was to leave to secure Berk. The man's duty was to stay with his sick, possibly dying fiancée in a little cave. Hiccup had never been forced to choose between her and Berk before. She knew the choice her own sense of duty demanded, and she knew the choice Hiccup would have made if she'd been healthier. She was also very aware of the paradox that, if she'd been healthier, there wouldn't have been a choice to make.

But to be honest, she was human too. She didn't want Hiccup to leave. She didn't want to be alone and sick with Stormfly on an unfamiliar island.

But for now they were both grounded and stuck in a cave so she walked over and sat down next to Hiccup, resting her head on his shoulder. After a moment, Hiccup's arm folded her around her shuddering form and pressed her against his side.

And for that one brief moment, despite the pain and shaking that continued to wrack her body, with her dragon and her Hiccup, she was at peace.

3. Ties of Bitter Blood

Chapter Three

Ties of Bitter Blood

"It was as though in those last minutes he [Eichmann] was summing up the lessons that this long course in human wickedness had taught us—the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought defying, banality of evil."

-Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem

Hiccup's mind became fuzzy as his mind slowly floated out of the haze

of sleep. He was very warm, his fuzzy mind noticed, and his body was wrapped around a soft, very familiar shape. _Astrid,_ a distant part of his fuzzy brain reported, and he wrapped himself harder around her soft form without question. For a moment, the hypnotic up-and-down motion of her breathing against his chest threatened to lull him back to sleep.

She's breathing, Hiccup thought to himself idly, then he remembered why that was a big deal. He remembered her fall from Stormfly's back. He remembered the spice that had become a poison that was still in her body. He opened his eyes, and stared at her sleeping form. Sweat matted her blonde hair to her side, and her skin was pale. But she was breathing.

Her eyes were also squinted shut even in her sleep. _She's in pain even now,_ he realized, as a searing front of hot, black, anger came over him, that made him for a few brief moments want to fly back to Berk, find whoever did this to Astrid and then beat him or her to death with his bare hands. If she died he'd be well within his rights to do so. His people had taken great stock in vengeance since before the days of Ragnar Lodbrok. However much the thought tempted him, however much he hated whoever did this to her, Astrid wasn't dead yet. He prayed that she'd pull through. But if she died, he very much doubted he'd stop until whoever did this had died by his hands.

It wouldn't bring Astrid back though.

He leaned down and kissed her sweat-slicked forehead. "Pull through, love," Hiccup whispered. "You're so strong. This is just one more battle. Fight."

Hiccup turned to face the cave mouth, guarded by the curling and sleeping forms of Toothless and Stormfly. The storm that had blown in from the north had largely dissipated during the night. There were a few patches of clouds, but they'd likely be gone by the time the sun finished rising.

And that was the other thing. Astrid was too sick to fly on her own. And since he was dead certain she had been deliberately poisoned with, malice aforethought, Berk could very well be in grave danger. He couldn't conceive of any of his people wanting to hurt Astrid, she was abrasive and demanding yes, but they were _Vikings_, that was kind of expected, and their respect for Astrid was equal to their respect for him.

Unless, a voice whispered snarkily in his head, _it _was _one of my own with a grudge, or is just insane. Or maybe it _was _an accident and I'm just leaving Astrid alone in a cave to chase imaginary conspiracies. _Damn this uncertainty. He needed to get back and find out what's been going on.

But what about Astrid?

As much as he wanted to leave for Berk, he wanted to stay with Astrid more. She was sick, and he didn't know how long she'd be sick. She couldn't fly without the risk of falling off her dragon. Also, they had always, _always,_ stood by each other when the other was ill. Even just being there had helped the other cope without going completely insane.

And now he was being asked to let her go at this alone with only Stormfly for protection. Stormfly could protect her from hostile locals be they humans or dragons, but even that had its limits and she certainly couldn't protect her from the poisons in her system, or the fact that she'd have to face being sick in a cave she couldn't risk leaving for however long it took for the effects to wear off.

He considered the possibility of sending Fishlegs or Eret back to stay with her, but if taking out Astrid was the prelude to a strike with ships and soldiers his combat ready dragon riders needed to be on Berk. If only he could manage to take her home without risking her life again. He looked over at the dragons, then Astrid's flight suit which lay crumpled against the cave wall along with his own. And not for a good reason like the strenuous post-flight lovemaking they normally engaged in. _Damn it, _he thought irritably, _why can't I get her home?_

Then the idea occurred to him. _Maybe I can build some sort of platform, _Hiccup thought to himself, _it could hang by vines in Stormfy's hind clawsâ€¦_ The image of Astrid convulsing herself out of the basket he was building put paid to that plan.

The tired, worried portion of Hiccup's brain then generated the idea of simply suspending Astrid between Toothless and Stormfly on ropes for the trip back. The normally intelligent portion of his brain woke up and, in a desperate bid to save Astrid, throttled that idea quickly with images of Astrid convulsing her arms out of her socket.

_What am I going to do, _he thought desperately, the urge to pace back and forth flooding over him. _I can't just leave her here._

"I know what you're thinking," Astrid said from behind her and he turned to see her lying on her side and giving her a look of concern. "You're going to have to go, honey. No matter how much it hurts. I'll be along as soon as I feel better."

"_If _you feel better," Hiccup said pointedly, unable to keep the trembling from his voice. "_Why _didn't I listen to the rest of Johann's tale. I'd probably know the answer now. I don't think you'll die, but we can't be sure can we?"

Astrid gave him a look that somehow managed to combine mild rebuke and desperate, pained sympathy. "Yes, you should have, but what's done is done. We are the leaders of our people. Berk is more important than either one of us, and right now she's in danger." Astrid sighed and closed her eyes. "Look. I'm scared too. I don't want you to go. I _really_ don't want you to go. But you need to go."

Hiccup nodded. "I'll figure out who's behind all this, stop whatever they're planning next, and then I'll be back for you," his voice shook with determination. He moved to get out of the bed when Astrid's hand reached for him, stopping him short. Her other hand reached around the back of his head and pulled him into an insistent kiss. For a long moment the two lay there, lips locking and relocking, tongues playing, as both prayed that this kiss wouldn't be the last one.

Astrid broke the kiss after a long moment. "Go save Berk," Astrid said softly, her hand on his cheek, the burning heat of Astrid whenever she touched him reduced to a dull warmth. Astrid's smile was wan. "I'll be here."

"Please be here," Hiccup said pleadingly, staring at her and trying to keep the tears out of his eyes. He tried to smile at her to lighten the mood. "I'll never forgive you if you die on me out here."

Astrid kissed him again, a quick peck on the lips this time. "You have my word, honey."

Hiccup smiled. "That's all I've ever needed, hatchet."

* * *

><p>Astrid stood unsteadily on her feet as she watched Hiccup saddle Toothless. He'd left her all the camping gear and the supplies. She'd need them far more than he would since she'd likely be here awhile. He'd be only be back home in a few hours after all.<p>

_Don't go, _ a pleading, terrified part of her couldn't help but think. _Please don't go. I need you._

But he needed to go. And as much as she wanted to tell him, she couldn't. Besides, he knew she was scared.

She shook that thought down. Berk needed him more. And if he chose her over Berk he wouldn't be the man she'd fallen in love with. Granted, if they suddenly came under attack as he was leaving, he wouldn't run off and leave her in the lurch, but the odds of that happening were slim at least.

The rustling of leaves outside brought her up short. Hiccup froze in place, hand on the hilt of his sword.

_Don't think, Astrid, _ she admonished herself mentally, grabbing her axe from where it had been resting against the cave wall. _Bad things happen when you _think. Well not really. She didn't really realize it herself yet, but she was just as keenly intelligent as Hiccup, even if her tastes and style were different. She'd blamed herself, however, for her attempt to intimidate Drago which had only served to make Berk a target insteadâ€|and had allowed Drago's Bewilderbeast in range to suborn Toothless and had nearly cost Hiccup his life, and had cost Stoick his. When she'd finally broken down and admitted what she was feeling to him, Hiccup's response had been short, sweet and to the point.

"Hey, I can't count the number of times _my_ mouth has gotten us into trouble," was all he'd said before making love to her like spun glass.

She heard the whizzing rush of air as an arrow missed Hiccup's left ear by inches. Hiccup dodged to the left as Stormfly bounded in front of the cave entrance and unleashed a flurry of her tail spines out the cave mouth, followed by thumps and shrieks of pain in rapid succession.

Astrid rushed up to Hiccup's side, adrenaline masking the tremula.

She looked out the cave mouth. Stormfly's spines had shredded the thick tangle of bushes that had stood in front of the cave mouth, and the humans that had been hiding in them. Six of them lay in heaps on the ground, two of them weren't moving, one with a nadder's spine in his neck and another with one her stomach. She must have bled out in seconds. The other four writhed in pain from being grazed by high-velocity nadder spines or because they had them sticking out of their legs or embedded in their shoulders.

Hiccup and Astrid looked at each other pointedly, the two experienced warriors having agreed on what their next move without speaking a single word. They bounded out of the cave, Inferno out and flaming as they advanced on the party that had attempted to ambush them. They picked the first wounded warrior they saw, a young woman of about Astrid's height, eighteen with dark brown hair, and a nadder's spine embedded in her knee.

She immediately twisted her fingers roughly into the other girl's hair, yanking her upper body off the ground and her head back to expose her neck to Inferno, held close to her neck by Hiccup.

"Who att-," then her eyes fell upon the crest on her left shoulder. A skrill sergeant, emblazoned in bright blood red.

"Shit," Hiccup said, who noticed it to. "Berserkers."

The heavy thuds of armored and booted feet on dirt came and she looked up to see fifty Berserkers storm around the side of the mountain. Half of them had knocked bows. They took up positions flanking their axe and sword armed counterparts, deadly, razor sharp arrowheads pointed at their heads.

Then several things happened at once. The first thing was a volley of razor sharp nadder spines from Stormfly thudding into the backs of the guards directly behind him as a plasma blast from Toothless, blew apart the guards flanking them. The guards behind them gone, Astrid's reflexes and training tried to kick into overdrive and she raised her axe and charged the guards in front of her. The guards stiffened, hands tightening around the hilts and hafts of their weapons, as Hiccup kept pace with her.

She got all of five steps before a massive convulsion twisted every muscle in her belly and her thighs seemingly at once. Astrid crumpled to the ground as her body warred against itself. Fortunately it took her out of the path of the volley of nadder spines that ripped into the warriors that would have fallen upon her seconds later. Her brain numbed by the convulsions wracking her body, she idly wondered why Toothless hadn't followed it up with another plasma blast.

Then abruptly the convulsions stopped and she became aware again of the sounds of metal clashing on metal. Hiccup had gotten in among the remaining enemy to their front and while his flaming sword was enough to intimidate even the Berserkers, it wasn't enough to keep them all from attacking him and Inferno clashed with ordinary steel.

Hiccup's growth spurt in the middle of his fifteenth year had ensured that he gained nearly a foot in height. By the time he was sixteen he'd been taller than her, though not by more than a couple inches and filled out to make him actually learning the sword viable. Gobber had taught him himself, and he'd been just as surprised as everyone

else to learn he was actually good at it. Hiccup's training, skill, and attention to detail with the blade had ensured he could defeat attackers who had a height and strength advantage over him and they usually did. Just as those same qualities ensured she could do the same thing. Inferno had only made him deadlier. Which was amply demonstrated when a Berserker woman overextended herself to bring her axe down on top of Hiccup's head and he got in under her and rammed his sword in her gut.

Her brief cry of agony was cut short as the fiery blade went through her gut and cooked every internal organ at once.

Toothless roared, and a flash of plasma leapt out of the cave and suddenly there were no more opponents

Toothless and Stormfly bounded down the hill towards them. Astrid grabbed her axe and climbed up onto Stormfly's back.

A heartbeat later, the loud report cracked out over the valley, the threads of heavy rope settled down on top of her, knocking her off Stormfly's back and pinning them both to the ground. More booted feet came up to her and she found a sword point sticking through the netting and pressed against the base of her throat.

"Halt!" A harsh male voice said, presumably at an enraged Hiccup. "Not one step closer. Drop your weapon, and that dragon of better keep his mouth shut, or she dies if it's the last thing I do."

After a long moment, she heard Hiccup's sword retract with a loud hiss before soft plunk of it being thrown to the floor.

"That's better."

* * *

><p>"I hate this," Astrid said sullenly from next to Hiccup in the wagon where he and Astrid had been unceremoniously thrown into. Their dragons, penned and muzzled, rode behind them as the train of warriors trudged down the fog shrouded moor.<p>

"We put up a good fight," Hiccup said soothingly.

"No, you put up a good fight!" Astrid bellowed, eyes blazing. The enraged look on her face instantly became one of contrition. "I'm sorry, Hiccup. You put up a good fight. You put up a great fight. It's just-"

"It's just you wished you'd put up a great fight too," Hiccup finished for her, as the caravan filed into a field full of tents that was clearly the Berserker camp. "But it's not your fault, In fact I'm increasingly sure it's these Berserker's fault." He leaned, more like fell because of this bound hands against Astrid and kissed her cheek. "Just one more thing to ask them about then," he whispered softly in her ear. Before we and our dragons cut out of this place.

The wagon lurched to a stop, causing them both to pitch forward in their seats, unable to stop themselves because of their hands bound behind their back.

An armored Berserker opened the wagon and pulled them out and on the ground. He looked up to find himself staring up at a massive green and brown canvas tent staked up in the middle of the camp. It's ornateness, and the massive Skrill emblem emblazoned on the front of it, suggested it could only be one thing: the Chief's tent.

"So I take it we're about to meet the new Chief of the Berserkers," Hiccup remarked smartly. "I can just feel our whole day about to get much better."

She heard a sound from Astrid that sounded suspiciously like a suppressed chuckle before he felt the point of a sword pushed against the small of his back. "Move, Hooligans!" They shuffled forward reluctantly into the tent.

"Well, well, well, Hiccup Horendous Haddock III," a female voice came from their right. Hiccup turned to see the partition to the sleeping chamber moved aside to reveal a petite young woman, with long brown hair. Her boiled leather armor was unelaborate save for the Skrill emblem in red, practical, but couldn't entirely mask any hint of the curvaceous figure it shielded. The hawkish, calculating gaze of her black eyes fell upon Astrid, "and his loyal dog." Hiccup bristled at the insult. A side glance to Astrid informed him that Astrid longed for her hands to be free so she could leap across the tent at her and punch her into the floor.

"Tell me," she said smirking, "how have you enjoyed my handiwork so far. I'll admit I had no idea you were coming all the way out here on your survey mission until my scouts reported it. But it at least allowed me to view our handiwork up close."

"So it was the Berserkers," Hiccup said darkly, "I might have known. Chiefâ€|?"

"VigdÃ-s," she said, low and vicious. "You've had this coming a long time. You murdered my brother and you murdered my father."

"You're brother attacked us without provocation," Hiccup found himself growling. "We tried him for it and executed him under the laws of our people. And we didn't murder your father, my people had great respect for Chief Oswald. _Dagur _murdered your-," He was cut off by the burst of light as his eyes squinted suddenly in response to their captor's vicious backhand slap.

"Dagur may not have been the most stable of people, and he and our father disagreed often, but _he _didn't kill him. No," she sneered, "it was _your_ people, agents of Berk who snuck into his house and murdered him in his bed. 'Without provocation.' And my brother still offered your people the hand of peace, before your people not mine slapped his hand aside."

"No, Hiccup," she growled. "Sooner or later, the day comes when you must answer for the things you've done. And that glorious day is coming soon."

No Home Yet

"In the nightmare of the dark
All the dogs of Europe bark,
And the living nations wait,
Each sequestered in its hate."

-W.H. Auden, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats."

"Sooner or later, the day comes when you must answer for the things you've done. And that glorious day is coming soon," Vigd s said, glaring at Hiccup.

"So what you're going to hold me and Astrid responsible for defending ourselves?"

"For _murder!_" Vigdis snarled. "And who said anything about holding Astrid responsible?" She said in a casual tone. "You're her commander, you're responsible. However," and her gaze turned on Astrid as she reached behind her back. Hiccup's blood turned cold and his stomach turned to lead when Vigd s drew an axe she must have had hanging there. "Since _you _are responsible, I see no reason not to start my vengeance now." She nodded and the guard behind Astrid drove a booted foot into her knee, causing her to crumple to the floor before he grabbed a fistful of Astrid's hair and yanked her head back to expose her neck.

"No!" Hiccup shouted. "Please," he said, too terrified to bother to hide his distress. "Your quarrel is with me then deal with me. Let her go and I'll come quietly. You can do what you want to me. Just  let Astrid go," he said softly, pleadingly, finding himself fighting back tears. "Please." His eyes darted to Astrid. Astrid sat there on her knees, fighting to present the look of someone facing death with dignity

Vigd s' stony face was unmoved. "It's too late, Hiccup," she growled. "Five years too late."

Without another word, Vigd s turned and raised her axe.

* * *

><p>Astrid closed her eyes instinctively against the axe head slashing towards her neck. She was not going to go out like a coward. No amount of pretending could mask the sheer terror boiling inside her though. And it wasn't just at the prospect of dying with an axe buried in her neck either. It was the prospect of, even for a little while, having to go to Valhalla without Hiccup. No amount of glorious battle or pig-like feasting afterwards would help if the man she loved wasn't sharing it all with her.<p>

She heard a whooshing sound and her head fell forward  and stopped, still being held up by the muscles of her neck.

Surprised, she threw her eyes open, to see Vigd s' axe at her side as she looked behind her with a shocked look on her face. She twisted her head around just enough to see the guard who'd hit her in the

knees crumpled to the ground dead, with an arrow sticking out of his right eye.

"We're under attack!" a voice outside shrieked. "To arms! To arms!"

She heard Vigdã-s swear viciously and charged out of the tent, taking most of the guards with her.

"What?" Astrid couldn't help but think out loud, "Not leaving guards to keep us from escaping."

"She's probably thinking we're just two unarmed bound prisoners," Hiccup said, his voice dripping with his usual snark. "We couldn't possibly get very far if we escaped."

Astrid stumbled to her feet and started pawing at the dead guard's sword with her foot, trying to ease it out of its scabbard. "If I can just get this out on its side we can use it to cut the bindings off."

"Good idea," Hiccup said, "I'll spot for you, so you don't accidentally open your wrists."

"That would put a damper on things," Astrid remarked deadpan. She managed the bottom quarter of the sword just out enough to expose some of the edge. Astrid lowered herself down gently and began to grind her bindings up and down against the sword.

"That's it," Hiccup began to say after a few moments, "that's it Astrid, you're almost out andamp;stop!" Astrid stopped and pulled her hands apart, the last bits of rope coming free easily, she stood up, grabbed the sword and cut Hiccup's bindings in an instant.

The moment his hands were free, Hiccup grabbed her and pulled her into a bruising kiss. She wanted to remind him that they had to get to their dragons and get out of here but she stopped when she remembered that Hiccup almost watched her die just five minutes ago. Her own fear in that moment returned and she just stood there, leaning into his kiss.

Hiccup broke the kiss. "Now let's go get our dragons."

The second Astrid pulled the flaps aside she saw the dragons still in their wagons. Penned and muzzled, the two of them struggled frantically against their restraints, reacting to the sounds of nearby battle. She looked around her, thick black smoke rose around them in a ring from the edge of the camp, no more than a couple hours ago. The sounds of battle were getting closer, the sounds of steel against steel and men and women shouting and killing grew louder in her ears. While she couldn't be sure of the exact ebb and flow of the engagement, her trained, practiced ear could tell it was getting closer.

"Let's get our dragons and get out of here," Hiccup said quickly as he moved to pull Toothless' muzzle off.

Astrid shook herself and reached out, yanking off Stormfly's. Astrid received a cold, scaly, affectionate nuzzle for her troubles.

She couldn't help it, she broke out into a wide smile. "It's good to see you too, old girl," Astrid said softly, rubbing her neck. "Now let's get you out of here," she said as she reached for one of the wooden braces around her neck. After a few moments, she had Stormfly free and was guiding her out of the wagon.

"Here," Hiccup said as she looked up in time for her intended to shove her field pack into her hands before hastily throwing his on and buckling Inferno around his waist.

"It's a little odd, isn't it?" Astrid couldn't help but remark as she swung her long legs over Stormfly's back. "All our supplies just waiting for us?"

"Not really," Hiccup said as she finished buckling on Toothless' saddle and climbed onto his back. "They'd use the supplies too. Their plan was to murder one or both of us right then, after which we'd have no use for any of our supplies or dragons."

Astrid nodded perfunctorily, as she was looking not at Hiccup and Toothless but at Vigdǫr's triumphant face as she raised her axe. Astrid herself had killed in battle many times, so had Hiccup. Against people like Dagur and Drago. But never had she actually really seen the look of, perhaps not joy, but satisfaction. She realized that she truly believed Hiccup and her deserved to die, she wasn't a lunatic like Dagur, long on ambition, short on impulse control, nor was she using "justice" and "security" as a paper-thin cloak for vain ambition like Drago (who was also short on impulse control now that she thought about it).

No, Vigdǫr, had truly believed she was about to get justice for her brother.

And apart from a need for that, she had seemed almost _frightfully_ in control of herself. That was what got to her. This wasn't someone who was going to lose herself to some quirk, making them easy to outmaneuver and drive off.

This was a far more dangerous enemy. Assuming she managed to drive off her attackers.

"Let's get out of here," Hiccup said quietly.

The two dragons and their riders took off, circling about as they attempted to get a look at the forces attacking the Berserkers. The attackers had managed to break through the outer circle of camps, and the fighting was raging back and forth in the inner perimeter. Both sides, he noticed, were clearly distinct. The Berserkers wore the traditional full plate armor typically worn by Berserkers. Their attackers, presumably the locals, were distinguished because they wore long yellow shirts. The overwhelming majority of them wore lighter, leather armor over their shirts, but the occasional few, almost certainly their commanders, wore chainmail or plate.

"Must be the Albans," Astrid said, "Should we help them? Most of them are lightly armored, every single Berserker down there is fitted out as heavy infantry, they have the numbers advantage now, but in a standup fight like this they're going to get slaughtered." As was being proven right before her eyes. The locals battle line was already starting to waver as more and more of their fellows got cut

down. They were obviously skilled swordsmen, and skill and the ability to read an opponent _usually_ counted more than raw physical strength, the Berserkers still had heavier armor and broader shields, and hence the staying power to offset skill. The best swordsmen in the world still had to be actually get attacks through.

>Hiccup sighed. "I know. But we need to get back to Berk. We'll rake the Berserker lines as we're leaving, probably save a few more of them, but we're leaving."

Astrid sighed. She hated leaving potential allies in the lurch, but Hiccup was right, Berk needed her chief and her second-in-command. Plus, if they stayed to provide complete air cover, they risked her having another convulsion and falling off her dragon.

"All right," Hiccup said, nodding. "We'll make one close attack run over the center of the camp, concentrating our fire on the troops and the supply buildings. I'll go out ahead and you'll hang back on my port aft, taking out anything you can."

"Right," Astrid said, the tactic suited Astrid right down to the ground. Her spine shots, even in the thirty seconds the entire run would take from start to finish would cut through even Berserker armor like it wasn't even there and her fire, with the ability to melt molten rock in seconds would lead to a lot of destroyed supplies and cooked Berserkers in that time.

She sighed, _Tyr,_ she prayed mentally,_ God of war, grant that our shots be true and our wings swift. That we are the bane of our foes and the woes of the treacherous. _Abruptly the thought of another convulsion wracking her, sending her falling into that battle below and killing her before she had a chance to kill her enemies. And, even worse, leaving Hiccup to face the rest of his life alone.

And should the worst come to pass, grant me forgiveness.

"Let's get them, girl!" Astrid shouted, following in the wake of Hiccup's dive towards the enemy. Astrid pressed against Stormfly's sides in such and such a way, and a volley of spines shredded a squad of Berserkers headed to reinforce the battle line, ignoring their heavy plate armor as though they were sackcloth. Another volley repeated the performance, and another. Ahead of her, violet flares in the corner of her vision as Toothless's plasma blasts rang out again and again.

"All right, girl," she said viciously. "Let's give the enemy some fire of our own. Fire, full heat, port and starboard, now!" Stormfly bobbed a nod, before spewing yellow-hot orange fire and sweeping it over every tent. In front of them, Toothless began to pull up towards the open sky, Astrid followed in Toothless's wake, praying to Gefion, goddess of luck, that she didn't have another convulsion in the time it took to get clear. She was also patron deity of virginity, something that Astrid had handed over to Hiccup on her sixteenth birthday. She had to hope that she wasn't _too _miffed by that.

She clearly wasn't, or at least had decided she wasn't going to get back at her this time, her body remained under her own command as she leveled out her flight plan and the four of them flew north towards the coast.

It was when the sandy beaches and clear ocean water were ahead that

the two of them landed on the beach. Struck by this change, Astrid followed him down, watching as he dismounted Toothless and collapsed to his knees on the beach. Eyes widening, sudden terror flowing through her as her mind began racing. _Was Hiccup hurt? Did an arrow manage to get him and he just didn't notice until the rush of battle wore off?_ Scared beyond measure, she dove towards the deck and scrambled off Stormfly's back towards him. She didn't get too far before her stomach muscles felt like they were twisting in two different directions. She collapsed on the ground, grunting and hissing as her muscles raged and fire filled her veins. In an instant, through the pain, she felt the sensation of arms wrapping themselves around her.

Hiccup, she thought through the burning pain that filled his veins. After what felt like forever, the fire and pain began to recede and she lay there, enfolded in Hiccup's arms.

"So now what do we do?" Astrid asked, as the two lovers stared out north over the broad expanse of blue ocean towards home. Towards Berk.

"It appears we've reached an impasse," Hiccup said softly. "It's too dangerous to either go home or stay here."

"If only we could get some sort of message home, but we don't have a way of-," she said looking at Stormfly. Then it hit her. All at once. "How stupid are we?"

Hiccup, who, if anything was more embarrassed as the supposed smart one of the duo, looked at Stormfly and caught her brainwave, and grunted. "Pretty stupid," Hiccup said, before beckoning for Stormfly. "Come here."

Heather sighed as she leaned back in her chair in her office at the Dragon Academy. Unlike her friend Astrid, Heather's workload had never been particularly, from a certain point of view, excessive. She had her share of paperwork, but it mostly took the form of "after-action" reports, both from her research duties as an alchemist and her occasional field mission on her Monstrous Nightmare. Barring the thankfully rare crises, once she submitted her reports to the long-suffering Astrid, she could actually leave before it got too late in the evening most days.

I wonder how the exploration mission to Albion is shaping up, she thought, eager for the firsthand information that her friends were gathering. She had initially disapproved of their various exploration plans, claiming that they should be focused on defending Berk, and since she and her parents were Hooligans now thanks to the Berserkers it had caused no small amount of discord between them.

Thankfully, she'd mellowed out since then.

Her musings were interrupted with the loud thump of a dragon making a hard landing on the ground outside. An instant later she heard the desperate sound of clawing on wood interspersed with a desperate trebling warble. She cocked her head to the side as her brain raced to identify the odd sound. Her eyes widened. _Stormfly!_

She raced out of her seat and ran for the door, opening it to see a scroll tied to one of her horns. She tore the horn off and unraveled

it quickly. On it was a message, hastily scribbled in Hiccup's handwriting.

Heather

Astrid poisoned by confirmed Berserker operative on Berk. Portions of Kingdom of Alba are in fact under Berserker control. On my authority, alert all combat-capable dragon riders but take no further overt action. All of this can be taken as a routine patrolling and drilling. But _find _that spy. Trust Gobber. Trust my mother. Trust my friends. No one else. Any sort of offensive or rescue operation must be postponed until the enemy spy is caught.

Delivered under my hand and my seal

Hiccup, Jarl of Berk.

End
file.